Reading Instruction for Students Who Are at Risk or Have Disabilities

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To Beth and Stephen for allowing us the immense professional space required to bring this project to fruition. Without your patience, love, and support this book would not have been possible.
Contents

Preface xiii

Chapter 1 An Introduction to Systematic, Explicit Reading Instruction 1

Who Are the Students at Risk for Reading Problems? 3
When Is the Best Time to Begin Reading Instruction for Children Who Are at Risk? 4
Which Students Are Likely to Struggle When Learning to Read? How Can I Set Goals for Them and Monitor Their Progress? 4
What Essential Skills Do Students Need, to Become Mature Readers? 5
Phonemic Awareness 5
Alphabetic Principle 6

The Reflective Teacher: Does Teaching Phonics Make Sense? 7
Reading Fluency 8
Vocabulary 8
Reading Comprehension 9

What Is the Most Effective Way to Teach Essential Reading Skills to Children Who Are at Risk? 9
Tier 1 Instruction 10
Tier 2 Instruction 11
Tier 3 Instruction 11

What Are the Instructional Enhancements for Students Who Are at Risk? 12
Advance Organizers 12
Unison Responding 13
Effective Signals 13
Efficient Use of Teacher Talk 15
Perky Pace 15
My Turn–Together–Your Turn Format 16
Cumulative Review 16
Systematic Error Correction 16
Teaching to Success 17
Student Motivational System 17

Motivating Your Students to Do Their Best: Using the Teacher–Class Game 18

What Letter Sounds Do Teachers Need to Know for Teaching Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Skills to Students Who Are at Risk? 20
## Contents

Using the Chart of Letter Sounds | 20  
Fact or Fiction | 28  
Applied Activities | 28  
References | 29  

### Chapter 2  Phonemic Awareness  31

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What Skills Do I Need to Teach?</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmenting and Blending Sequence</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Efficiently Assess and Monitor the Progress</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Phonemic Awareness Skills?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segmenting First Sound: DIBELS Initial Sound</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency Assessment</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blending Individual Phonemes: Informal Assessments</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do I Teach Children to Segment and Blend?</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancements to Large-Group/Tier 1 Instruction</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Teachers at Work: Frequent Assessment</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research to Practice: Blending</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Support for New Learning</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reflective Teacher: Always Analyzing Students’ Answers</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seize the Teachable Moment: All Day Long</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Help Students Who Still Are Not Learning to Segment and Blend</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even with Enhancements?</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2 Booster Sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Help Students Who Still Are Not Learning to Segment and Blend</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even with Daily Tier 2 Booster Sessions</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research to Practice: What We Learned about Booster Sessions</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3 Placement Rules</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive, Alternate Reading Programs for Tier 3</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Teach Phonemic Awareness to English Language Learners?</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridging the Gap: Should I Use Manipulatives to Teach Phonemic Awareness?</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Connections to the First-Language Culture</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research to Practice: Intercultural “Blending”</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Important Is Phonemic Awareness Instruction for Older Learners?</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Use Games to Reinforce the Phonemic Awareness Skills That</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Have Learned?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology: Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Activities Help Students Apply Their New Phonemic Awareness Skills</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Reading Words?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating Your Students to Do Their Best: Teaching Classroom</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routines and Procedures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3  Alphabetic Principle 68

What Skills Do I Need to Teach?  69
   Sequence for Teaching Alphabetic Principle  70

Bridging the Gap: Rationales for Introducing Letter Sounds in Two Systematic Phonics Programs  72
   Build on Previous Skills  74

How Do I Efficiently Assess and Monitor Students’ Progress with the Alphabetic Principle?  75
   Letter–Sound Correspondence: Informal Measure  76
   Lexical Retrieval: DIBELS Letter Naming Fluency  76
   Alphabetic Principle: DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency  79

Effective Teachers at Work: Use the DIBELS NWF to Identify Students for Tutoring  83

How Do I Teach Students So That They Attain the Alphabetic Principle?  83
   Identifying Letter–Sound Correspondences  84
   Writing Letter–Sound Correspondences  88
   Providing Differentiated Instruction  88

Seize the Teachable Moment: Help Your Students Articulate and Differentiate Sounds  89
   Reading Regular Words Is a Three-Part Process  90
   Writing Regular Words  99
   Reading Sight Words  101

Bridging the Gap: Which Is the Best Way to Teach Beginning Readers?  101
   Reading Decodable Sentences  103

Bridging the Gap: Can I Still Use My Word Wall?  104

Seize the Teachable Moment: A Dozen Creative Suggestions  104
   Reading Decodable Passages–Prealphabetic Principle  105
   Tips for the Transition from Words to Passages  107

Bridging the Gap: Should I Use Pictures with My Beginning Readers?  110
   Selecting Decodable Books  110

Research to Practice: Decodable Reading  112

Putting The Pieces Together: What Does Instruction Look Like for Tier 1 and Tier 2 Students?  112
   Kindergarten  112

Bridging the Gap: Should I Use Predictable Books?  113
   First Grade  113

How Can I Help Students Who Still Can’t Identify Letter Sounds or Read Regular Words or Longer Decodable Passages?  114
## Contents

What Can I Do for Students When Daily Tier 2 Booster Sessions Aren’t Working? 115

How Can I Teach Alphabetic Principle to English Language Learners? 116

How Important Is Alphabetic Principle for Older Learners? 119

How Can I Use Games to Reinforce Students’ Decoding Skills? 120
  The Word Box Game 120

Technology: Alphabetic Principle 121

What Activities Help Students Apply Their Newly Acquired Alphabetic Principle? 122

Research to Practice: Attitudes of Students Who Are at Risk 123

Motivating Your Students to Do Their Best: Strategies to Encourage Positive Behavior 124

Fact or Fiction 125

Applied Activities 127

References 129

---

Chapter 4  Advanced Word-Reading 131

Why Teach Advanced Word-Reading Skills When Students Have Already Attained the Alphabetic Principle? 132

What Advanced Word-Reading Skills Do I Need to Teach? 132
  Letter Combinations and Affixes 133
  One-Syllable Words Containing a Letter Combination 140
  Words with the Vowel–Consonant–Vowel Pattern (VCV) 141
  Regular Words with Two or More Syllables 141
  Words with Two or More Syllables and One or More Irregular Parts 141
  One- and Two-Syllable Sight Words 141

How Can I Assess Students’ Advanced Word-Reading Skills? 142

How Can I Teach Students to Decode Advanced Words and Words with Multiple Syllables? 143
  Identifying Letter Combinations and Affixes Introduced in the Curriculum 144
  The Suffix ed 144
  Reading One-Syllable Words with Letter Combinations 146
  Reading One-Syllable Words Ending in VCe 146
  Reading Regular Words with Two or More Syllables 150

Providing Differentiated Instruction 151

The Reflective Teacher: Teaching Multisyllable Words 154

Seize the Teachable Moment: Enhancers for Advanced Word Reading 155
  Putting the Pieces Together: Tiers 1–3 157

Research to Practice: Supporting Tier 3 Students in General Education Classrooms 157

How Can I Teach Advanced Word-Reading Skills to English Language Learners? 159
How Important Are Advanced Word-Reading Skills for Older Learners? 160
What Games and Activities Will Reinforce Students’ Advanced Word-Reading Skills? 161
Word Race 161
Short or Long Sort 161
Technology: Advanced Word-Reading Skills 162
Motivating Your Students to Do Their Best: Extending the Teacher–Class Game 163
Fact or Fiction 165
Applied Activities 166
References 167

Chapter 5  Reading Fluency  168
What Is Reading Fluency, and Why Do I Need to Teach It? 168
How Can I Assess Reading Fluency? 169
Scheduling the DORF 170
Administering and Scoring the DORF 170
Interpreting DORF Scores 171
Charting Progress on the DORF 175
How Do I Measure the Growth of Students Who Are Significantly Behind Their Classmates? 176
Bridging the Gap: How Should I Correct Errors During Oral Passage Reading? 177
How Can I Measure How Well Students Read with Expression? 177
How Can I Diagnose Student Error Patterns Using the DORF and Prosody Measures? 179
Low Accuracy, Below Benchmarks for Fluency, and Low Prosody Score 179
High Accuracy, Below Benchmarks for Fluency, and Low Prosody Score 180
At Fluency Benchmark but Low Prosody Score 181
Lacking Specific Skills 181
Over- or Under-Dependence on Context 181
How Can I Teach My Students to Read Passages Accurately and Fluently? 182
SAFER 182
How Do I Place My Students in the Right Reader? 185
How Can I Increase My Students’ Oral Reading Fluency and Develop More Expression? 186
Repeated Readings 187
Taped Readings 187
Partner Reading 187
Page Races 188
Echo Reading 189
Neurological Impress Method 189
Choral Reading 189
Different but the Same 190
## Contents

Using Keywords to Teach New Vocabulary Directly 221
Using Context to Teach Independent Word-Learning Strategies 222

*Seize the Teachable Moment: Teaching Vocabulary in Context* 223
Using Morphemic Analysis to Teach Independent Word-Learning Strategies 226
Using Word Parts to Teach Vocabulary 228

*Research to Practice: Vocabulary Instruction* 230

**How Can I Teach My Students to Answer Vocabulary Questions on High Stakes Tests?** 232
**How Can I Provide Extra Vocabulary Practice for My Students?** 234
Practice Activities for New Words 234
Practice Activities for Review Words: Coordinate Vocabulary with Writing Activities 237

**How Do I Teach the Language of Learning?** 238
**How Important Is Vocabulary for Older Learners?** 239

*Research to Practice: Language Development* 240

**How Can I Teach Vocabulary to English Language Learners?** 241

*Technology: Vocabulary* 243

What Games and Activities Will Reinforce the Students’ New Vocabulary and Language Skills? 244

*Motivating Your Students to Do Their Best: Structuring for Positive Behavior* 246

Fact or Fiction 247

Applied Activities 248
References 248

### Chapter 7 Comprehension 251

What Is Reading Comprehension, and Why Teach It? 251

- Text 252
- Reader 255
- Activity 255
- Context 255

What Underlying Skills Do Students Need to Comprehend Text? 256

- Oral Reading Fluency 256
- Oral Language 256
- Sentence Repetition 256
- Background Knowledge 260

What Are the Essential, Scientifically-Based Reading Comprehension Strategies of the National Reading Panel? 261

- Comprehension Monitoring 262
- Cooperative Learning 263
- Graphic and Semantic Organizers 264
- Self-Questioning 266
- Story Structure Analysis: Teaching with Story Maps 267
- Summarizing 268
Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answering Questions</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Effective Teacher at Work: Demonstrating the KWL Plus Textbook Reading Strategy</em></td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Use Multiple Strategies to Maximize Student Gains in Reading Comprehension?</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Assess and Monitor My Students’ Progress in Reading Comprehension?</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Research to Practice: Reciprocal Teaching</em></td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Effective Teacher at Work: Using Story Grammars</em></td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do I Motivate Students to Read Widely?</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do I Prepare My Students to Pass High Stakes Tests in Reading?</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do I Teach Comprehension to Older Learners?</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Can I Teach Reading Comprehension to English Language Learners?</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Games and Activities Will Reinforce Reading Comprehension Skills?</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find the Hot Spots</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Technology: Reading for Understanding on the Internet</em></td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide Evidence</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Would Your Character Do?</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try Out Your Test-Making Skills</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Research to Practice: Begin Writing with Kindergarten</em></td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Effective Teacher at Work: A Model Comprehension Lesson</em></td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Well Do I Understand?</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Text Detective</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact or Fiction</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Activities</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A How Do I Make a Progress Graph for One Student?</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B Signals Used in Formats</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C Teaching Formats</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Between 2000 and 2004 we implemented Project PRIDE, a four-year federal model demonstration project that employed evidence-based practices to prevent reading problems in children who are at risk in three diverse, high-poverty urban schools in Rockford, Illinois. The principals of these schools opted to reverse their course from a more naturalistic reading program and make the commitment to retraining their staff because of a history of chronic reading problems and a teaching environment permeated by failure. Failure rates on the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) for PRIDE schools ranged from 50% to 78%. Over the course of the project, through ongoing student achievement data and a close working relationship with the Rockford educators, we had the opportunity to fine-tune instructional strategies to a degree that would not have been possible without that collaboration.

During the four years of Project PRIDE we gained an even greater appreciation for Louisa Moats’ expression, *Teaching Reading is Rocket Science*. On a daily basis we observed that as the human mind acquires the intellectual muscle to learn to read, the teacher must not only know how to carefully teach the sequence of small steps needed for reading at grade level, but also to recognize the missteps that can thwart those efforts. Whether students came to school from high-poverty backgrounds, with no parental support, with learning disabilities or behavior disorders, with medical conditions, from backgrounds of abuse, or without English-speaking skills, most of them were able to learn to read. The research in reading, as described in *The Report of the National Reading Panel* (2000), provides a clear guide for the use of systematic and explicit instruction to teach the largest number of students to read. In this book we have translated that guide into a detailed blueprint based on 1) explicit, systematic instruction, 2) a multi-tiered teaching approach, 3) data-based decision making, and 4) ongoing professional development.

Project PRIDE was based on the idea that in order to implement effective reading instruction “one size does not fit all.” Therefore, we offered student support along a continuum of intensities or instructional tiers. These tiers allowed for maximum access to the general education reading program while providing more intensive instruction on an as-needed basis. The focus in each of those tiers was on skills in the five key areas identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) as essential for learning to read. These key areas include phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

In the PRIDE model, Tier 1 was delivered by the general education teacher using a whole-class grouping arrangement. Tier 1 instruction was based on the general education beginning reading programs that were used in the project schools including *Harcourt* (Farr, Strickland, & Beck, 2001) in two of our schools and *Open Court* (Bereiter et al., 1995) in one. We added several research-based teaching enhancements that help children who are at risk learn more efficiently and effectively (Kameenui et al., 2002). These teaching enhancements included the use of advance organizers; unison responses; appropriate level of teacher talk; a perky teaching pace; support for new learning using modeling, guided, and independent practice; careful, systematic correction of student errors; teaching to success; and a student motivational system.
Tier 2 consisted of booster or tutoring sessions that provided extra practice for small groups of two to eight students, working on essential reading skills covered in the school reading series. Students entered Tier 2 when their performance dipped below mastery on monthly or bimonthly curriculum-based assessments, but they still remained in the general education reading program. Tier 2 teachers used the same enhancements used in Tier 1 (e.g., unison response and systematic error correction), but at a different time of day in separate pull-out settings with smaller instructional groups. Tier 2 sessions were carried out by a variety of staff, including general education teachers, Title 1 teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals.

Tier 3 was an intensive alternative reading program (Reading Mastery) conducted daily in separate pull-out settings with small, skill-based groups of two to six students. Students placed in Tier 3 had failed to make substantial progress on PRIDE assessments despite extra daily help in Tier 2 booster groups. Reading Mastery (Engelmann & Bruner, 1995) was designed specifically for at-risk children in need of a more intensive beginning reading program. The phonetically based Reading Mastery curriculum is characterized by a carefully designed instructional sequence as well as multiple scaffolds to facilitate student learning. Tier 3 was taught by Title 1, foreign language, and special education teachers plus a few highly skilled paraprofessionals. Children in Tier 3 received their general education classes either during reading when the rest of the students were involved in reading activities that were at a frustration level for these students, or during a subject matter class such as science or social studies. Children in Tier 3 did participate in general education reading activities, such as vocabulary (done orally) and comprehension (as a listening activity).

Students were assigned to the PRIDE multi-tiered system based on their performance on monthly or bimonthly assessments. The assessment results were summarized by the project coordinator, who then convened a meeting of the teachers to discuss tier placements for the subsequent intervention period.

Early literacy performance was measured primarily using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Kaminski & Good, 1996). DIBELS assessments (Good, Gruba, & Kaminski, 2002) have been shown to be an accurate way of identifying children at risk for reading problems and monitoring their progress in phonemic awareness, attainment of the alphabetic principle, and reading fluency. A hallmark of the DIBELS assessments is efficiency, with each measure taking fewer than 5 minutes to give. At a time when the school calendar is increasingly taken up with high-stakes testing, efficiency was an essential quality for us.

Professional development and coaching for teachers and staff who carried out instruction in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 was provided by the two authors of this text. All teachers attended after-school workshops and a series of summer institutes, and received on-site coaching. The after-school workshops and summer institutes were used to introduce various teaching and assessment strategies, allow teachers to observe taped or live models of the strategies, and provide practice for the teachers in small groups using simulated experiences. During on-site coaching visits, data on tier implementation were gathered directly in the classroom; teachers were given feedback on their instruction until they demonstrated competence.

The impetus for writing this text came from the results attained during our four years of PRIDE implementation. Our results showed that all children could make progress toward learning to read when a system of assessments guided staff to identify children who were not responding to instruction, allowing them to meet their individual needs using evidence-based instructional options of varying intensities. The assessment and teaching strategies that were successful in PRIDE are those that occupy the pages of this text. The data shown in Table 1 from one project school and a control school reflect the percentage of children meeting or exceeding standard on the Illinois State Achievement Test.

Note the significant increases from 1999–2000 to 2003–2004, the latter being scores for our first PRIDE cohort. It is interesting that the ISAT scores for our PRIDE school began improving for the 2002–2003 school year, despite the fact that these were students who
were not officially part of the project. We believe that at least part of that increase resulted because the school, seeing that PRIDE was working so well in the early grades, began to implement some of the same practices in the later grades that were not part of the PRIDE project. Note the rise in achievement at the control school for the 2003–2004 school year. This school began to implement the PRIDE model during that year and provided SRA Reading Mastery to all of its students in Grade 3.

It is clear from these results that more children met state standards in reading as a result of Project PRIDE. It is also true that about 30% of the students did not meet state standards. These were largely students who were receiving support in either Tier 2 or Tier 3. Nonetheless, our results showed that even though many Tier 2 and 3 students did not meet standards, they did make significant gains on all of the DIBELS measures (Bursuck, Smith, Munk, Damer, Mehlig, & Perry, 2004). We knew that grouping according to common skill needs had been criticized for exacerbating achievement differences by lowering expectations and watering down instruction, yet our results indicated that children can make progress in small, heterogeneous pull-out groups if the instruction delivered in those groups is evidence-based and delivered with integrity. Systematic, explicit instruction in our Tier 2 and Tier 3 small groups ensured significant progress for students in both of these groups. For example, effect sizes for all three tiers on all of our early literacy measures were all well over .40, the level at which an effect size is considered significant (Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997). Small, skill-based groups are not a dead end, if done appropriately.

Another common drawback of having different instructional options for children is that racial minorities tend to be overrepresented in the groups of children who are not responding to instruction. In PRIDE, children were assessed five to six times per year using highly efficient assessments directly tied to curricular goals and objectives. These assessments allowed us to make decisions in the best interest of individual children without being influenced by potentially biasing factors such as race. Our results showed that the proportion of African American children served in Tiers 2 and 3 has been no greater than could be expected given their proportion in our school population at large.

Whatever disagreements exist in the field about how to teach reading, few would argue with the overarching goal of a nation of life-long learners who enjoy reading for information as well as pleasure. We are troubled when educational strategies such as skill-based grouping, pull-out, and drill-practice-and-review are viewed as antithetical to the enjoyment of reading. That criticism is why we surveyed the attitudes of our Tier 1, 2, and 3 children at the end of grades 1 and 2 (McKenna & Kearn, 1990). The results showed that children receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction had positive attitudes toward both academic and recreational reading and that their attitudes were not significantly different from their Tier 1 counterparts. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, all three tiers averaged about 3 on a 4-point scale, with 4 indicating a high positive attitude. Child success, more than where instruction takes place, is what truly matters when it comes to students’ attitudes toward reading. We believe we have also demonstrated that drill is one ingredient of an effective reading program for students who are at risk and, if done effectively, can thrill—not kill.

We know that however positive the results, it is often teacher acceptance of an instructional approach that determines the likelihood that it will continue to be used over time (Polloway, Bursuck, Jayanthi, Epstein, & Nelson, 1996). At the end of each year of the project, we surveyed our teachers to find out their feedback on all aspects of the

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Satisfaction was of particular interest to us because of our emphasis on teacher accountability for the reading achievement of each and every student. Our teacher satisfaction results, shown in Figure 3, have been very encouraging, with acceptance ratings after the first year for all parts of the model being consistently rated over 3 on a 4-point scale, with 4 representing the highest satisfaction. In the words of one of our principals, "It is interesting to watch the teachers' perceptions of Project PRIDE transition from fear and distrust to such high levels of satisfaction now that they are held..."
directly accountable for student growth. I've watched them quickly develop their capacities to serve all of the learning needs within their classrooms after systematic professional development.”

At the conclusion of the project, we asked teachers whether they thought their school should continue to implement Project PRIDE the following year. Twenty-nine, or 85%, of our project teachers responded to the question. Of the 29 teachers who responded, 28 (97%) wanted the project to continue.

Project PRIDE, with its emphases on regular progress monitoring of all students and the provision of a range of instructional supports based on need, is consistent with the provisions of the recent No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The results for children in all three of our tiers showed that 95% of the children made reading progress, and that their attitudes toward reading were positive. Our Title 1, general education, and special education teachers found the model acceptable and the model has been continued beyond the funding period. All of these results have encouraged us to write this book so that other teachers can become empowered to teach children to read who have traditionally been left behind.

DVD of Teaching Formats Included with this Book

In our work with teachers, the following concern was repeatedly raised: “Everyone talks and writes about how I should teach reading, but it would be such a help to actually see these skills being taught to children.” That concern provided the impetus for producing this companion DVD. The video footage shows a teacher using the reading formats from the book to teach critical reading skills to students in a small group classroom situation. Viewers can refer to the text as they watch phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, word reading, vocabulary and passage reading with comprehension being taught. For easy reference, menus on the DVD identify each format and reference the specific table in the book in which the teaching skill is introduced.
Acknowledgments

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Research reviews on teaching reading to adolescent students with LD testify to the importance and timeliness of this issue, and they present valuable instructional guidance (Edmonds, 2009; Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008; Gajria et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). This research tends to emphasize that students who struggle with reading have a break where the impulse doesn’t travel the same route. The brain compensates by rerouting which causes over activation in the front area of the brain called Broca’s region. Most readers’ brains transport the information of reading along a certain track of reading, but in more recent years research has found some readers to have neurological disorganization when attempting to read. Some children with reading disabilities have more severe problems that reading aloud to them alone cannot help them overcome. Some struggling readers have to focus so much on figuring out the word, the meaning of the text gets lost.